

A Filial Piety

Luke 2:41-52; 1 Samuel 3

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Though this story about Jesus as a boy is told near the beginning of Luke's gospel, like the birth and infancy narratives preceding it, it was most likely written and added last to the growing body of stories about Jesus. As I mentioned during the Christmas season, unlike the stories that came to life and began circulating as people actually encountered the words and deeds of Jesus in his adult ministry, the stories about Jesus' birth, infancy, and childhood developed only after his followers experienced his death and resurrection. Only after Easter did they come to wonder about how miraculous his birth must have been and to ask about what Jesus must have been like as a child. Had he been a child prodigy? Had there been signs from very early on telling who Jesus was and what he was called to do?

You can imagine the desire people had to know more about Jesus. Turning to tabloids, biographies, or personal memoirs, we can hardly satiate our desire to know more about the lives of people in the public eye. So it was also for the early Christians.

In fact there was so much interest that a whole genre of biography grew up prior to and around the time Luke wrote his gospel. Biographical stories about heroic figures were not uncommon. We find ancient stories from world literature about great men who already from an early age were child prodigies, exhibiting extraordinary knowledge or other early signs of their vocations: the Buddha in India, Osiris in Egypt, Cyrus the Great in Persia, Alexander the Great in Greece, and Augustus in Rome (Raymond Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas*, pp. 40-41).

Non-biblical Jewish stories written around the same time as New Testament stories portray Moses as just a boy when God gave him knowledge that astounded others. This morning you heard a passage from 1 Samuel in which Samuel, only twelve years old, was called by God to become the great temple priest. Like the author of 1 Samuel, who wrote that the child Samuel "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people" (2:26), Luke ended the story about twelve year-old Jesus with similar words. "Jesus," he wrote, "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (2:52). Ending with such a statement and showing similarities to other stories about the precocious childhoods of leading figures, it is not surprising that this particular story in the Gospel of Luke has come to be known for revealing early signs of Jesus' extraordinary vocation even as a young boy.

No longer circulating by itself, this story about Jesus as a boy stands in the context of what Luke told before and after. So far, in Luke's Gospel, the vocation of Jesus has been revealed by a string of others: first the angel Gabriel, then the shepherds, then Simeon, and then Anna. Now finally, in verse 49, Jesus himself speaks. In response to his mother and father, who have been frantically searching for him, Jesus says, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

These are the first words that Luke attributes to Jesus, and they form a statement implying who Jesus is and what he is called to do. While he doesn't come right out and say it, he implies that he is the Son of God. As the Son of God, he must be in his Father's house. In time Luke will make it clearer to everyone what Jesus meant by these words.

For now, imagine the shock, the utter disorientation that Mary and Joseph must have experienced when, after searching three days, they finally found their son not among their relatives or friends, which would have been understandable; not lost in a city crowd, which too could have happened; but rather in the world-famous Jerusalem temple, teaching religious teachers. Their shock would only have been exacerbated by Jesus' statement. Before they could even experience the relief of finding their son, a cloud of disorientation about *who* their son was settled over them.

Throughout the gospels are stories in which the people closest to Jesus are confused about who Jesus is. To be sure, his disciples experience their fair share of confusion. People from Jesus' hometown too are puzzled: in the Gospel of John, when Jesus talks about himself as having come down from heaven, they ask, "Is not this

Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” The disorientation over Jesus’ identity is most striking when it comes to his family. In Mark, when Jesus’ mother and brothers are waiting for him and call to see him, Jesus responds by saying, “Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-34). In a later chapter of Luke, when Mary and Jesus’ brothers come asking for Jesus, he responds in a similar way, saying, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:19-21). It’s not that Jesus’ family members were especially hardheaded. That even Mary and Joseph, in the gospel lesson I read this morning, did not understand what Jesus was saying to them was Luke’s way of getting across to us how early signs of Jesus’ extraordinary vocation began calling into question who they thought Jesus was.

From Jesus’ response to his parents, what can we know about 1) who Jesus understood himself to be and 2) what he understood himself as being called to do? These are typical questions about vocation. Vocation is often thought of as consisting of the sense of what we should do and who we should be. There is, it seems to me, another question, one that, while not overtly raised, is nevertheless key to our sense of vocation. It is a question about relationships, and it comes prior to the other questions of vocation. In order to know “who we are” and “what we should do,” we need to ask ourselves first, “whom are we called to serve,” “to whom are we committed,” “for whom are we responsible.”

It is often the relational questions that disrupt the status quo. In the first scripture lesson we read this morning, in which the boy Samuel receives his first call from God, a call that is more a confiding in than a command to speak, above all Samuel struggles with the strain that God’s call might place on his relationship with Eli. Understandably, when God confides in Samuel that God is about to disrupt Eli’s priestly lineage, removing Eli’s sons from priestly power because of their unchecked corruption, Samuel is afraid to tell the vision to Eli, his mentor, the man who had raised him in the temple most likely since the age of three and was therefore like a father to him. For Samuel, Eli was the only father-figure he had ever known. To illustrate this point in rather humorous fashion, the teller of this story says that when Samuel heard God’s voice calling in the night, Samuel got up each time and went to Eli, thinking that the voice belonged to Eli, which in Hebrew means, “my God.” For young Samuel, who hadn’t yet had a personal encounter with God or who hadn’t yet developed a personal relationship with God, Eli was the all-important authority-figure in his life.

In both stories, one thing seems for certain: A call from God calls into question our relationships, not because our relationships aren’t good or valuable, but because they aren’t universal. The call to be in relationship with God can disorient all our relationships because it calls us to figure out how we can be in relationship with all people. Samuel was fortunate because, despite his worry, Eli, the only father he had known, was a man of faith and put the will of his Father in heaven before all else. In Luke’s gospel, even as a boy, Jesus understood himself to be first and foremost the Son of God. The filial piety of a son faithful to his Father in heaven colors and qualifies every other relationship in Jesus’ life, all his other commitments and responsibilities, even the commitments he has to his earthly parents. As a master of avoiding either-or ways of thinking, Luke is able to tell this story about Jesus’ understanding of himself as the Son of God without alienating his parents Mary and Joseph. Ending the scene with Jesus’ obedience to Mary and Joseph, Luke upholds both the relationship Jesus had to his earthly parents and the relationship Jesus had with his Father in heaven. In both relationships, Jesus was a faithful son.

As we try to discern for ourselves what God calls us to do and who God calls us to be, none of us can escape the prior question of relationship: with whom does God call us to be in relationship? As children of God, we know the answer. Jesus, Son of God, sets the example. As Son of God, Jesus takes upon himself the duty to be loyal to all to whom God is loyal. No one is excluded from the scope of his care and concern.

Tomorrow this nation celebrates the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. That Martin Luther King was a great civil rights leader in America’s struggle to overcome racism against black Americans is well known. He was called, however, not only to address the American situation. Always asking “who are we meant to be,” King had a sense of responsibility to people beyond his own race. He was called to a vision that transcended the situation of black Americans. In an essay, he wrote of a vision of a “great world house in which we have to live together - black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu.” King went on to write, “However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes. . . . All inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors” (Martin Luther King, “The World House” in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* p.177).

In about four weeks, the world will be watching the winter Olympic games in South Korea. We have been hearing recently in the news that the two Koreas are in talks about the North's participation. Two days ago, we learned that the North is even considering a proposal that the two Koreas form a combined Olympic women's hockey team.

Historically, since the Olympics were revived in 1896, the games have provided an arena for politics to take a back seat to athletic competition. There is no doubt that international politics have leveraged the Olympics for political causes, mostly through boycotts, and the games have occasionally been cast with political overtones, but for the most part the games have played out in an alternate arena to politics and without real political consequence. On the world stage, countries in the Olympics are allowed to relate in ways that in real politics would be unthinkable.

That sports can provide such an opportunity is an insight that Nelson Mandela leveraged for the purpose of uniting racial groups in South Africa. President Mandela may have been the first global leader to use sports to unite people. Before his release from prison, Mandela had watched political prisoners playing soccer together, and he began to take a keen interest in sports like rugby that were known to be sports for white Afrikaners. When he became President, he set out to convince the black community to support a rugby team that had only one black player at the time and to convince the predominantly white team to warm up to him as the country's new leader. Everyone had to learn to relate in new ways. The team captain Francois Pienaar, like most young white men in the country, had grown up believing Mandela was a terrorist. And this white captain had to convince his team to learn the words to the country's new national anthem, previously a song of black protest. About the power of sports to break down racial barriers, Mandela said:

Sport has the power to change the world...it has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers (David Bond, "How Nelson Mandela Used Sport To Transform South Africa's Image," BBC).

Of course, sports is not the only realm in which new, even previously unimaginable relationships can be played out. It is in the realm of the arts that I have personally found this to be the case. I attended Rhodes, a small liberal arts college in Memphis, Tennessee, a city deeply scarred by racism and where the color line between blacks and whites in this country was still evident. It was there at Rhodes that I met Nicole, a fellow student. Nicole was one of few African American students at Rhodes, and I was one of even fewer Asian American students in the student body. Perhaps because Nicole was the first person in her family ever to go to college, she took her studies very seriously. And so when she appeared in the same drama class that I was taking as an elective, I decided that, given her work ethic, I would be very lucky if she would be my partner for our final acting assignment. For our final, Nicole and I prepared and acted out a scene from one of Arthur Miller's plays in which she and I were sisters in a family reeling from the death of a father. Acting was a bit of a stretch for my reserved self and so was the challenge of convincingly acting as sisters, but we performed our scene, and in the end, when we received feedback from the class, our professor told us that he really got a sense of our being sisters. I remember that, at that moment, Nicole and I turned and looked at each other - she an African American and me an Asian American.

Vaclav Havel, before becoming President of Czechoslovakia was a well-known playwright. In a startlingly rapid and unexpected change in world geo-politics, Havel was catapulted from the position of dissident writer to president almost overnight. Reflecting on the contributions that the arts can make to politics, Havel urged artists to stop shunning politics and instead to help transform politics from being an art of the possible, by which he meant an art of speculation, calculation, and pragmatic maneuvering, into the art of the impossible (*The Art of the Impossible*, 8).

Not all of us are called to be political leaders, artists, or athletes, but all of us engage in these realms. Whenever we think it is impossible for people of different races, religions, genders, and regions to live together in a world house, we are likely spending too much time in those realms where only what is possible is considered and calculated. It is at those times especially when, as the story of Samuel's call opens, "the word of the Lord is rare and visions not widespread," that we need all the more to listen for God's call. And no matter what God calls us to be and to do, God calls us to be in relationship with everyone, as children of God in one world family.